

Mononobe no Futo's Bad Day

by Ianho

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Summary: If Mononobe no Futo had known what she was getting herself into when she entered the Bamboo Forest of the Lost, she would never have gotten out of bed that day...

1. Chapter 1

Mononobe no Futo was many things: scion of the storied Mononobe clan, immortal shikaisen, trusted right hand of the Crown Prince, feng shui master; the list went on and on. Unfortunately, the latest addition to that list was 'completely lost in an impenetrable forest at night'.

It was all Seiga's fault, as usual. She could hear the wicked hermit's coy, simpering voice even nowâ€|

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><p>"Really, Miko darling, you simply must get in touch with those Lunarians."

"Thou wilt show proper respect to Her Highness, base-born mountebank!" snarled Futo.

Seiga continued without missing a beat. "After all, that doctor of theirs can do almost anything, I've heard. Even the Human Village swears by her amazing remedies; imagine what her support could do for your reputation! And let's not forget Princess Kaguya herself. A single glance from her drives men wild! Why, even the Son of Heaven couldn't resist her beauty, or so the stories go."

Toyosatomimi no Miko let out a single, thoughtful "Hmmm". Her ever-present shaku started tapping gently against her lip; a sure sign that she was considering something very carefully.

"My Prince, you cannot seriously be thinkingâ€|" Futo whirled to face

Miko, mouth ajar.

"Enough, Futo. Seiga may not be as respectful as you would wish, but she does have a point. I have been awake for quite a while, but still have not paid my proper respects to the House of Eternity. This should be remedied as soon as possible. And who better to send than my trusty second?"

Futo shot a venomous look at Seiga, but Miko's words soothed her a little. "As you command, my Prince. Your will shall be done."

* * *

><p>Futo had never considered disobeying Miko's instructions, but she was beginning to grow tempted to interpret them as loosely as possible. She had been wandering the Bamboo Forest of the Lost for nearly six hours, two by air and four on foot, and the daylight was already failing rapidly.<p>

Her overflights of the forest had shown her nothing but a sea of gently waving bamboo stalks stretching almost to the horizon, so she had landed and began exploring on foot. Four hours of searching passed without encountering anything, not even one of the rabbit youkai who were supposed to be infesting this forest.

Every single direction-pointing ritual Futo had tried, whether from the traditions she learnt as a child or the arts that Seiga had taught in secret, had failed. All that effort, and not a single sign that the domain of the Lunarians was anywhere nearby. Wait, hadn't she passed that rock twice already?

"Truly, this accursed place well deserves its name. I had thought it simply the over-active imagination of the peasants or some minor enchantment, but to baffle even my skillsâ€¦" Futo's mutterings trailed off as she saw a faint glimmer ahead.

No, not just any glimmer. A fire! She hadn't been so glad to see one since Sakurai-ji went up in flames. Of course, that one didn't really count, since she had been the one who set it...

Futo shook her head a little and started walking towards the flickering light; now was not the time for wool-gathering. She was tired, hungry, and more than a little frustrated. Resting for a while sounded like an excellent idea, and if the person in front could give her directions, all the better. She didn't even care where the directions took her, as long as she managed to get somewhere instead of wandering aimlessly.

Soon, she emerged into a little clearing, where a figure was hunched over a fire burning away merrily.

"Hail and well-met, stranger! Dost thou have room at thy fire for a weary traveller, perchance?"

The person sitting on a large rock next to the fire glowered at her as she approached, but nodded and jerked her head slightly, indicating a patch of somewhat dry ground opposite. Futo nearly flopped down in exhaustion, but caught herself just in time. Instead, she carefully lowered herself to the ground, tucking her legs comfortably under her.

The flickering firelight revealed Futo's new acquaintance to be a woman dressed in one of the more outlandish costumes she had seen since her awakening. Long, unkempt white hair, a white tunic with a strange collar and what looked like red hakama, but were far tighter and covered with talismans. Truly, this was a strange era she had returned to.

After an awkward few minutes of silence, Futo spoke up. "Thou hast my thanks for the warmth and shelter, however rude it may be. Know that thou hast the honour of granting succour to Futo of the Mononobe, who is master of the True Way, seneschal of the Hall of Dreams' Great Mausoleum, majordomo of Senkai, and trusted advisor of the Crown Prince Toyosatomimi no Miko. What might thy name be, stranger?"

The woman snorted as Futo recited her titles. She didn't look too impressed, but commoners of this era usually reacted that way. Proper respect seemed to be incredibly lacking in this day and age. Nevertheless, Futo would be magnanimous. Allowances had to be made for their sad ignorance, after all. Of course, once the Crown Prince was properly installed as ruler of Gensokyo as was her rightful due, all that would change...

Startled, Futo realised that her companion had been speaking. "I beg thy pardon?"

"I said, I'm Mokou. Mokou of the Fujiwara, if it makes any difference to you."

Futo blinked a little. Fujiwara, Fujiwara. The name didn't sound very familiar, to be honest, but the way Mokou had said it, it was almost as if she expected her to know it.

"I pray thy forgiveness, but the name and deeds of the Fujiwara are not known to me. Alas, I have slept for most of an age, and much has changed since I last walked the soil of Nihon. Nevertheless, thine appearance does not bespeak much of them. Perhaps they are vassals charged with the care of this place? My condolences; such a duty must be onerous indeed."

Mokou snorted again, even more contemptuously than the first time, but stayed silent, letting the expression of distaste on her face speak volumes on her behalf.

Futo continued, uncaring of the mood. "Tell me, Fujiwara, art thou well acquainted with the paths of this benighted forest? I have a commission to fulfill from my master, and I would fain complete it swiftly. Dost thou know where the House of Eternity, demesne of the Princess Kaguya, may be found? I wish to meet her with all haste."

Mokou's expression remained unchanged, save for a barely perceivable twitch when Kaguya was mentioned.

"Huh. Wouldn't have thought you'd be looking for that place. You're one of that Taoist Saint's crew, aren't you? Heard about you people when I last went into town to visit Keine."

The white-haired woman idly stirred the fire with a dry branch, causing it to flare up slightly, while continuing to speak.

"The Myouren bunch seemed to be particularly upset, for some reason. Funny, it's usually Reimu who complains most about incidents. Anyway, what do you want to see Her Exalted Lunarness for?"

Futo fumed inwardly. The idiot woman didn't seem to understand. Perhaps it was time to speak plainly.

"I would have thought my words earlier to suffice to make my purpose clear, but 'tis obvious that I presumed overly much. Nevertheless, I shall be generous and repeat myself: I am the representative of the great and glorious Crown Prince Toyosatomimi no Miko, who has awakened once more to bring her wisdom and guidance to all. Currently, I seek the Princess Kaguya of Eientei in order to present my lord's compliments to her. Lead me to her domain, and thy reward shall be rich. Otherwise, do not waste my time bandying words as if this were a marketplace and I a fishwife."

Mokou sighed. "Figures. Should have expected nothing else from a Mononobe. After all, they always were a bunch o' stuck up posers with their noses in the air."

She jerked herself to her feet sharply, stretching and working out the kinks in her back.

"Allies of granddad or not, they always were utterly insufferable. No wonder they changed their name later, probably couldn't stand to live with the shame of losing that war."

Futo was stunned into silence temporarily, but soon wounded pride and anger began to overwhelm her surprise. What did this jumped-up peasant think she was doing, referring to her honoured clan that way?!

True, she might have abandoned them and the ancient faith for the sake of the Crown Prince and the True Way; but she would kiss that rotting jiang-shi of Seiga's before she let an insult to their name pass!

"Thou hadst best still thy foolish tongue, else I still it for thee. The Mononobe were great and honoured before thine ancestors first scratched a living from the soil. Indeed, thou wouldst be well-advised to do as I instruct, or the consequences will not be pleasant."

Mokou leaned forward a little, smirking. "Oh? And just what're you going to do if I don't? Kill me?"

Perhaps it was something about the way the firelight fell on Mokou's face, but her entire presence seemed to have changed. Futo began to feel a little apprehensive. The white-haired woman didn't feel like a youkai (Oh, Futo knew those accursed beings far too well); yet no mere human could ever have exuded this feeling.

It was time she nipped this in the bud. Surely this disrespectful hick could be cowed by a show of force?

Slowly getting to her feet, Futo fixed Mokou with the coldest glare she could muster.

"I know not what foul arts thou possess, but know that I am a shikaisen, one who has overcome death itself! The secret arts of the Mononobe and the power of the True Way are united in me!"

She held out a hand, and fire bloomed in her palm, red hot and ready to be hurled at the soon-to-be humbled Mokou.

"Fear me, Fujiwara, and learn thy place!"

Mokou replied with a fireball of her own aimed squarely at Futo's face, which she hastily dodged with an undignified squawk.

"Oh, please. You really have been out of it for ages, haven't you? I haven't heard someone talk like that - alright, someone other than Kaguya when she's being even more infuriating than usual - since the Edo," drawled Mokou. "Also, immortality isn't exactly the best thing to use to scare me, ya know? You're speaking to someone who drank the Hourai Elixir, after all."

Even Futo had heard of the Hourai Elixir, though Seiga had only ever mentioned it as being a legend. Regardless, the immortality it was rumoured to grant was something even she could never hope to match. Her mind frantically raced to think of something to get her out of the mess that seemed to be getting worse every minute.

What was that barbaric custom they had here? The one that the shrine maiden had used to defeat her just after her awakening?

"I, I challenge thee to a contest of...uh...ah, yes, danmaku! If victory shalt be mine, thou shalt guide me to Princess Kaguya and nothing more shall be said of thine appalling manners."

Mokou advanced, cracking her knuckles. "And what if I win?"

"Uh, I shall say nothing more of thine appalling manners?"

"Wrong answer."

2. Chapter 2

Mononobe no Futo had never been known for her calm and rational reactions to unexpected situations. This probably explained why she was still wandering deep within the Bamboo Forest of the Lost in the dead of the night, with her eyebrows singed off and smoke still wafting off the charred edges of her robe.

The shikaisen was currently stumbling aimlessly down an overgrown path, just wide enough to allow her to pass. A continuous, sullen mutter could be heard drifting down the track.

"Mayhap I acted too hastily when dealing with that base-born incendiary. Uncouth she may have been, but her skills in our duel were indeed worthy of song!"

* * *

><p>A massive explosion shook the stillness of the Bamboo Forest, as yet another century-old stand of bamboo was reduced to splinters by an errant danmaku shot.<p>

The match between Mononobe no Futo and Fujiwara no Mokou was in full swing, and the night skies lit up every so often with a fresh display of pyrotechnic might.

"Submit to me and swear loyalty to the rightful rule of the Crown Prince, and I may yet be merciful!"

"Don't get too full of yourself; you might just spill!"

Mokou seemed to be getting more talkative as the duel continued. She'd started with grunts and then progressed to one-word insults.

Now she'd started getting - horror of horrors - _witty_.

"Hourai ~~~~~South Wind, Clear Sky -Fujiyama Volcano-~• !"

Futo swore and rolled out of the way of yet more spouts of flame, which then proceeded to explode violently, spraying great fountains of fire in every direction. She immediately took to the air, jinking and weaving around, and managed to successfully dodge every blast sent her way.

That is, every blast except the last, which proceeded to explode directly in her face and sent her crashing back to earth. Picking herself up, Futo groggily assessed her current prospects of winning. Unfortunately for her, the battle appeared to be leaning distinctly towards Mokou at the moment.

"What's the matter, can't take the heat?"

The Hourai immortal stalked forward, flames surrounding her like a halo.

Futo was already getting quite winded, to tell the truth. That last point-blank hit had taken quite a bit out of her. Nonetheless, her blood was up, and she would rather have died than admit any weakness at that point.

She sprang to her feet, calling on whatever reserves of strength she still possessed.

"Flatter not thyself! Thine embers could barely warm the meanest hovel, let alone hurt one such as myself. Now, witness the very concept of fire, the flames that spring from the heart of all creation! Blaze Sign ~~~~~Taiyi True Fire~• !"

Mokou began to dodge, first slowly, then faster and faster as the gouts of glowing plasma launched by Futo began igniting the surroundings violently, causing additional bursts of flame to shoot in every direction. No one could have avoided them all, and one well-aimed shot scored a direct hit, reducing the Fujiwara to a blackened crisp. Futo's shout of mingled surprise and triumph was cut short as Mokou got up a few moments later, looking none the worse for wear.

"Hah! Not too shabby, I'll admit, but it's not like dying fazes me much."

"Barbaric though it may be, was not this method of duelling claimed to be non-lethal?" Futo called out, a slightly dumbfounded expression on her face. It was not every day you saw someone get up after being incinerated. "The shrine maiden herself did inform me that once the contest was agreed upon, the magic of the land itself enforced that rule, save by mutual consent."

Mokou simply shrugged. "This body of mine is so weak, it even dies from danmaku shots, but I just resurrect anyway. Yeah, Keine keeps nagging me to live more healthily, but I figure, why bother?"

Futo nodded. "Truly, the power of the Hourai Elixir is beyond compare. Say no more, and let us end this farce before any more time is wasted."

"I couldn't agree more. Phoenix Rebirth!"

The Taoist barely had time to move before the first barrage of flames smashed into her, followed by a second, then a third wave. Everything went black, and she knew no more.

* * *

><p>Futo came to her senses a short time later, with a throbbing headache that was even worse than her hangover from that twenty-jar shochu dare with Tojiko. What had just happened, and why was she sprawled out on the forest floor?<p>

Suddenly, the memories of the last thirty minutes flooded back into her mind, and she jerked up and looked around. Mokou was gone, and the only evidence remaining of their duel were the smouldering bamboo stalks and the blackened patches of forest floor.

Slowly getting to her feet, Futo couldn't help wincing as her body protested vigorously at the fresh abuse she was heaping on it. Slowly, she began limping back down the narrow trail, deeper into the forest. She wasn't about to admit defeat in her quest just yet. If she did, not only would Miko be very disappointed with her, that ass Tojiko would be utterly insufferable for the next few months.

3. Chapter 3

It was a pleasant night in the Bamboo Forest of the Lost. A gentle breeze was blowing, and the full moon had risen, bathing everything beneath it in a soft silver glow.

Nevertheless, Mononobe no Futo was not in the mood to appreciate any of it. Every last part of her ached, she stank of burnt bamboo and singed hair, and to make it all worse, she was still no closer to her destination than she had been before that ill-fated duel with Mokou. Muttering to herself, she trudged down yet another path that looked exactly like the one before it, and the one before that, and the one before that...

"Pah! 'Twas but an underhanded blow that allowed that charcoal-burner to best me. Had it been a fair contest of skill, the power of the True Way wouldst surely have triumphed! Next time we meet, not even if she wielded the flames of Amaterasu would she triumph, for I, Futo of the great Mononobe Clan, shall not be defeaâ€|"

A loud crack was all the warning the shikaisen had before the ground beneath her feet ceased to exist, and she fell into nothingnessâ€|

...landing with a solid thump on the floor of a deep pit, breathless from the fall and from her cry of alarm. (Not a squeal! She had most certainly not squealed!)

Picking herself up from the dirt, which appeared to be becoming a common event in this thrice-accursed forest, Futo looked around her new surroundings. She was in a large hole, nearly two metres deep, with sides of loose, crumbly earth.

In the Outside World, such a situation would have meant a long wait till someone came along and provided aid. However, this was _not _the Outside World, and all it took to escape the pit was Futo simply floating up and out, and landing with a huff.

"Hmph! To use such cowardly artifices in order to ensnare the unwary! Truly, this age is one of most irreverence and disrespect! Nevertheless, 'tis but a simple matter for one such as myself to overcome these minor inconveniences."

With those parting words, Futo turned to stalk off...and was violently jerked off the ground by a hidden snare just beyond the pitfall, leaving her dangling upside down from a particularly tall clump of bamboo.

The Taoist's final thread of composure snapped.

"Come forth, thou naughty varlet! Face me, and show thy coward visage, else I pronounce thee craven, accursed, spawn of aâ€|"

Futo's wild ravings were cut off by a snicker emanating from a bamboo thicket, which soon developed into full out chuckles, as a slight figure wearing a pink dress emerged, eyes glimmering with wicked glee.

"Well, well, what have we here? Here I was looking for rabbits, and instead I caught myself a boar, and a big fat one too!"

"Art thou calling me swine, rascal?! Thou shalt release me this very minute, or else learn that the wrath of Futo of the Mononobe, Master of the True Way, is terrible to behold!"

The rabbit-eared girl grinned, idly tossing a coin in the air.

"Oh? But aren't you the one tied up here? Surely it should be me making the demands? Also, 'Master of the True Way' or not, you seemed pretty lost earlier. You sure that True Way of yours is actually leading you anywhere?"

A queasy mix of panic and rage was currently filling Futo as she struggled with her bonds.

"Cease thy japery, knave! Mock not that which thou dost not fathom! The True Way governs all that is and ever will be, and the gibes of fools matter not a whit to those who have been initiated into its

mysteries."

The foul youkai (for what else could such a being be?) simply smirked.

"Well, initiated into mysteries or not, I think I'm the one who's in charge here, and you're the one dangling up in the air. So, what'll it be? Shall I leave you here to keep pondering on your True Way, or shall I have some more fun before...Whoa!"

That last exclamation was due to the sudden fireball that hissed past the rabbit's ears, as Futo had begun wildly hurling flames in all directions.

"Thou shalt trick no more humans with thy cursed wiles, foul youkai, for I, Mononobe no Futo, will ensure that thou art ended once and for all! This I swear, by the plate that housed me!"

Looking slightly less confident than when she first stepped out, the pink-clad rabbit took a few steps back, just as an extremely well-timed (or ill-timed, depending on the perspective) fireball burned through the rope holding Futo up.

The shikaisen landed on the ground with a thud, knocking the wind out of her. The rabbit took this as her cue to make a hasty departure, turning and dashing down the winding path deeper into the forest.

"Fie on thee, thou faint-heart! Stand and face the one who wouldst be thine opponent, and mayhap I might give thee a swift end!"

Gasping a little, the Taoist hauled herself to her feet and ran after her erstwhile tormentor. Futo was willing to suffer no more indignity this accursed night, and she would be damned before she let this vile trickster escape to wreak more havoc elsewhere.

4. Chapter 4

Mononobe no Futo panted desperately for air as her feet pounded incessantly on the soft forest floor, dodging the occasional boulder, and striving mightily to overtake a very, very fast rabbit who appeared to not want to be overtaken.

The chase had been going on for a while. If Futo's reckoning was accurate (she had somewhat lost count between the second pitfall and the fourth cul-de-sac), she had been attempting to chase down the foul youkai for at least an hour. Several times, she had nearly lost the wretch, only to catch sight of her at the last minute. Why, if she didn't know any better, she'd think that the pest was toying with her!

Of course, no such thing was happening, and it was obviously only Futo's superior woodcraft and finely honed senses that was keeping the chase going. She did have to grant that the rabbit was amazingly fast, and cunning in a low sort of way. It almost reminded her of hunts back in the old days, when the Crown Prince and her faithful retainers would head out on horseback, ready for a day of pitting their wits and strength against the untamed wilds. Ah, what a magnificent sight it was! They would be lined up outside the city

gates, and then the Crown Prince would stand up in the stirrups and cry...

"Tewi! Teewiiii! TEWI! Where are you, you blasted bunny!?"

The call rang out just ahead of her, and Futo's befuddled brain had only enough time to snap back to the present before the shikaisen crashed into a tall, lavender-haired girl who had just turned the corner, bowling both of them over in a tangle of limbs. Grunting in pain, Futo picked herself off the ground yet again (this 'falling' thing really was becoming a bad habit) and turned to look at the person whom she had literally just run into.

The unfortunate woman groaned as she picked herself off the ground, all the while using some very creative insults to describe a certain 'Tewi'. Her whole demeanor felt...tired, for lack of a better word, and she looked haggard and careworn. Her clothes, a short pleated piece of fabric which barely reached above her knees, and a collared white tunic much like Mokou's, were wrinkled and stained, while there were massive eye bags below her large red eyes. As she brushed dirt and leaves off her body, her long ears twitched incessantly, as if constantly detecting unheard sounds.

Wait, what? Red eyes? Long ears!?

"By the Sacred Boat of the Mononobe! Yet another foul youkai here to hinder me in my mission!"

The newcomer blinked, looking confused. "Uhh, I'm not going to hinder you in anything, just so you know. Also, aren't you the one who knocked me over? I should be the one accusing you of hindering me."

Futo had the grace to look somewhat abashed at that. "Indeed, my haste blinded me to much, and 'twas my lack of caution which led to that unfortunate matter just now. However, I was hunting down a foul trickster, who used her cowardly wiles to ensnare me. I am on a mission of great importance, and the delay cost me much. Such impertinence should be punished!"

The Taoist eyed Reisen's ears suspiciously. "Whilst thou keepest a civiller tongue in thine head than that youkai, thy features art somewhat similar. Art thou by any chance associated with that vile miscreant?"

The rabbit-eared woman let out a long-suffering sigh. "You ran into Tewi, didn't you? Urgh, not only is she nowhere to be found whenever master or the princess wants her, now she's pranking random travellers as well. Honestly, that girl will get herself in real trouble one day."

Futo's ears pricked up at the magic word. '_Princess_'? Could it be? Was her quest at an end at last? She was so excited, she failed to notice that the woman had not quite answered her question.

"Princess?! What Princess do you speak of? Quickly, answer! For I have been seeking the Princess Kaguya for many a long hour, and my mission cannot be delayed!" barked Futo, unconsciously taking a few steps towards the newcomer.

The rabbit-eared woman held out her palms. "Whoa, whoa. Calm down! Yes, I'm part of the Princess Kaguya's household. Her guardian and tutor, the Lady Yagokoro, is my master. Just who are you, and why are you looking for her so urgently?"

Cursing herself for a short-sighted, excitable fool, Futo sketched the most elegant bow she could perform. Unfortunately, but understandably, after being pummeled by an immortal, falling in a pit, getting caught in a snare, and tearing round the Bamboo Forest for an hour chasing a rabbit, it was not really very elegant at all. Her burnt, tattered clothes and the multiple bruises and scratches festooning the Taoist's limbs and face did not help.

"Forgive me my shameful lack of manners. Thine eyes look upon Mononobe no Futo, representative of the great Crown Prince Toyosatomimi no Miko, once known as Crown Prince Shoutoku. I seek the Princess Kaguya in order to present the compliments and greetings of the Crown Prince to her Highness the Princess, as is meet and proper."

The lavender-haired woman simply quirked an eyebrow. "Huh. In that case, do you need me to take you to Eientei? It's not too far off from here."

It was all Futo could do to stop herself falling on her knees in gratitude. Even her desire to roast Tewi to a crisp, or the fact that she was most likely talking to a youkai, was forgotten at the relief of finally making some progress in her mission.

"Yes, verily! Indeed, this meeting with thee 'twas most serendipitous. Thy master must be blessed to have such a faithful retainer, and the Princess Kaguya thrice-blessed to have a such wise and devoted guardian. Lead on, O journeyman. "

The rabbit-eared woman looked a little confused, mouthing to herself "Journeyman?", but then just shook her head a little and turned around, starting to walk in the direction she had been coming from earlier.

"Right, but watch out for Tewi's traps. I'm pretty sure she's laid some which I didn't spot or trigger earlier. Oh, and by the way, my name is Reisen Udongein Inaba, but you can just call me Reisen."

The Taoist dashed after Reisen, face all smiles. "Ah, 'tis a pleasure to make thine acquaintance, Journeyman Reisen! I normally do not behave this familiarly with my inferiors, but thou mayst address me by my given name. Consider it a reward for thy service towards me and the Crown Prince."

Reisen was a little too far ahead for Futo to make out her words, but they sounded suspiciously like "Oh, the princess is going to love this one." Then again, there was still some dirt in her ears, so obviously she must have misheard Reisen. Instead, Futo sped up her pace to keep with her guide, as the rabbit was now moving faster through the maze of paths, making turns without a second glance.

After what felt like an eternity, but in reality was less than fifteen minutes, both of them emerged into a clearing. A sturdy, but

low, fence and gate were present, looking elegant but clearly purely decorative. However, in front of the gate, there was someone Futo had not expected to see at all...

"Oh myyy~. It sure does look like you're not having the best of days, Futo. Isn't it good that the Crown Prince was getting a bit worried and sent me out here to see if you needed help? After all, I am her Highness's most faithful and capable servant. "

Futo grit her teeth. Could this blasted day get any worse?

"Tojiko. How very...nice to see thee here."

5. Chapter 5

Mononobe no Futo was almost certain that someone, somewhere out there, had something against her in particular. There was no other way to explain the sheer run of bad luck she'd been experiencing. Sure, the Ministry of Right and Wrong had it out for her for cheating death anyway; but there were supposed to be rules for this kind of thing. A shinigami would come and challenge her, they'd have an epic battle, she'd be victorious and go home to Miko in triumph. This kind of farce, on the other hand, was just...petty. Also, getting Tojiko involved counted as cruel and unusual punishment, at least in her book.

The sound of a throat loudly cleared dragged Futo's attention back to the nightmare her life was rapidly becoming.

"If you're quite done staring, can we finally go into the mansion? I've been waiting here for nearly an hour, and the night air is a bit chilly. You should probably get cleaned up too, you look and smell even worse than that pet of Lady Seiga's," muttered Tojiko, screwing up her nose as a particularly pungent whiff reached her.

A scathing reply on her lips, Futo opened her mouth, then closed it with a snap. The thought of letting out her frustrations on Tojiko and shutting her up for good (or at least the next couple hours) had a certain attractiveness, and Futo was sorely tempted to indulge herself. The only thing that held her back was the knowledge that her mission would be completely ruined if the two of them descended to brawling at the very gate of Eientei. What would Princess Kaguya think of the Crown Prince if her chosen emissaries couldn't even tolerate each other? No, for the sake of fulfilling Miko's charge to her, she would hold back. Her revenge would come afterwards, and it would be all the sweeter for the waiting.

With this thought consoling her, Futo nodded her assent. "Indeed. Come, Tojiko. Let us ready ourselves to be presented to her Highness, the Princess Kaguya. We have a charge to fulfill, and I would fain see it done afore the day-star rises once more."

The shikaisen turned to Reisen, who looked both fascinated and disturbed as she watched the two Taoists.

"Lead the way, Journeyman Reisen! If thou wouldst show us both some place where we could prepare appropriately for an audience with thy Lady, 'twould be most welcome indeed."

With a small sigh, Reisen turned and gestured for the two of them to follow her. The three women stepped (and floated) through the gates, and down a winding path paved with artfully cut cobblestones. A sharp right turn, and Futo's breath caught in her throat at her first sight of Eientei.

Outwardly, it seemed to only be a traditional Japanese manor, albeit a well-built one. Illuminated by the full moon, a raked gravel garden surrounded the house proper, with the ubiquitous bamboo of the forest growing here and there, but in ways that made it clear that the growth of these particular clumps had been directed by someone. All in all, it appeared to be a large but simple country residence; something that would have been built on a whim by even the lesser nobility of Futo's day.

Nonetheless, there was something ineffable about the simplicity of Eientei; something that Futo could not put her finger on. The shikaisen had seen her fair share of magnificent palaces, monumental shrines, and glorious temples in her previous life, but somehow, the House of Eternity seemed more substantial, more real than all of them combined. There was a sense of permanence and timelessness about the place that made anywhere else seem ephemeral and young. To someone who was (technically) more than a millennium old, this was a humbling feeling, yet strangely enticing at the same time.

Forcing down a lump in her throat that had mysteriously appeared, Futo glanced at her ghostly companion for a few seconds. Judging by the dumbstruck yet strangely longing look on her face, Tojiko felt the same way.

How long the two of them stood there, Futo never knew. The spell was broken at last by Reisen's slight cough. The rabbit-eared woman was standing at the door, and appeared to have entered the house and reemerged while Futo and Tojiko were distracted.

"You two can come in now. The second room to your left down the corridor has everything you will need to freshen up. I've told Master of your arrival, and she has gone to inform the Princess. Someone will be sent to escort you to the audience chamber once the Princess is ready. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have something urgent I need to see to." Turning on her heel, Reisen strode off, disappearing round the corner as quickly as she had appeared.

Removing her footwear, Futo entered, moving slowly as if in a daze. Tojiko floated alongside her, equally subdued. Inside the room that Reisen had indicated, they found a basin of cold, clear water, as well as perfumed soaps, fresh with the scent of herbs. An elaborately decorated folding screen provided a modicum of privacy, and divided the room in two. On the other side, a plate of mochi was laid out on a low table, with a fresh, steaming pot of tea next to it.

The sight of the mochi reminded Futo that she had not eaten for over twelve hours, and she suddenly felt ravenous. Making a beeline for the plate of sweetmeats, Futo grabbed one and stuffed it into her mouth without any concern for decorum, chewing loudly on the sticky pastry.

"Ah, the famous elegance of the Mononobe. They truly set the standard for etiquette through the land. It makes me ashamed to even be in their presence, unmannered as I am, " murmured Tojiko. The ghost

drifted over to the teapot, gracefully pouring a cup for herself, and one more for Futo. Picking up her tea, Tojiko inhaled the fragrance wafting up from it with an expression of pleasure.

"No one would think thee mute if thou didst not open thy fool mouth, Tojiko," retorted Futo with a scowl, flopping onto an embroidered cushion and swallowing the last chunk of mochi in her mouth. And things had actually been going well for once, Futo thought bitterly. The feeling of serenity from earlier was slipping away rapidly.

"_My_ fool mouth? That's rich, coming from the one who habitually blurts out the first thing that comes to mind," snapped Tojiko. The peaceful mood was well and truly gone now. "Did you already forget how you mouthed off to that youkai abbe the first time you met her and nearly got smashed by an angry nyuudou? Oh, and then you decided it was a good idea to try and set it on fire! It was a living cloud, what did you expect would happen? In case you missed the memo, water doesn't burn!"

Futo looked away, cheeks reddening. "'Twas but a momentary lapse of judgement. Those vile charlatans deserved chastisement, though perhaps not at that very moment. Now, pray excuse me, as I will need to perform the proper ablutions before we are called into the Princess's presence." She jumped to her feet hastily and proceeded to do just that. That the basin was behind a screen that completely hid her from sight was in no way related to her actions, of course.

Just as Futo came out from behind the screen, feeling refreshed for the first time in hours, the door to the room slid open. The shikaisen froze as she saw a short, rabbit-eared figure silhouetted in the doorway.

A childish voice piped up. "Umm, honoured guests, the princess is ready to see you now. If you will followâ€¦|Huh? What's the matter?"

"Tis thee, thou knave! Art thou not the one called Tewi, who so vexed both me and Journeyman Reisen earlier? Thou wilt pay for thy transgressions, for so I swore on the plate that housed me!" Futo snarled, as she pointed a shaking finger towards the confused rabbit.

"But, but I'm not Lady Tewi! I'm Totoko! I don't look like her at all!" protested the rabbit. "I haven't seen Lady Tewi for a few weeks, and I've been here pounding mochi and helping in the clinic all thisâ€¦|." Her voice trailed off as Futo advanced, a mad light in her eyes. The earth rabbit audibly gulped, and a panicked look appeared on her face. The next second, she turned tail and bolted down the corridor just as a fireball crashed into the doorway.

Letting out a loud oath, Futo immediately dashed after her. She would not let the foul trickster get away again, not when she had infiltrated the very house of the Princess! A pained groan could be heard coming from the room she had just left, but Futo paid no heed to Tojiko's foolish behaviour. Swift, decisive action was what was called for here, instead of acting like an old woman!

The rabbit was only mid-way down the corridor, Futo saw. A warm glow

rose in her, as she rapidly gained on her quarry. Now, she would be avenged for her humiliation, and a menace to all humanity removed for good!

Just as Futo prepared to seize her target, the rabbit suddenly turned sharply to the right, disappearing through an open doorway. Futo attempted to follow, only to find herself on a smooth, freshly polished floor. Futo's stockinged feet scrabbled for a few seconds but found no grip, and the shikaisen crashed to the floor with a loud squeal. She slid forward a few metres before coming to a stop, face down. The Taoist slumped bonelessly, groaning in pain.

"Perhaps my zeal did burn too brightly for a moment there," mumbled Futo unhappily, not even raising her head.. She didn't even want to get up again. What was the point? "Was I born under an unlucky star, that such misfortune constantly dogs my footsteps? This last misstep might yet be my undoing..."

"I concur," said a cool, authoritative voice. "Now, explain yourself. Who are you, and why are you chasing the rabbits of Eientei through its corridors?"

Futo gulped and raised her head. Two newcomers stood before the shikaisen. The one who had just spoken was dressed in a long, sweeping dress of blue and red with what looked like constellations upon it, and wearing a strangely-shaped cap upon her head. Her long silver hair was braided tightly, and her ageless face had a severe look on it as she gazed on the unfortunate Taoist. The earth rabbit from earlier peeked out from behind her flowing skirts, then ducked behind them again quickly.

The other person stood just slightly shorter than the one in blue and red, but her presence was no less the greater for it. Long, lustrous hair which nearly swept the floor framed a face whose allure would leave even the most self-assured person a stammering, blushing fool. Futo had seen many beauties in her day, even counted herself among them, but this woman outshone all others as the sun outshone a candle. Elaborate robes of pink and red pooled around her, with delicate embroidery picking out patterns of leaves and branches upon them. Her eyes danced with mirth, as if at some private joke.

"Futo, you idiot! What happened? I heard you scree..." Tojiko's voice trailed off as the newly arrived ghost took in the tableau before her.

"It appears that these are the guests that Reisen informed us of, Eirin," smiled the pink-clad newcomer. "Well then! While this may not have been how I expected things to go, I see no reason to be too upset. I am the Princess Houraisan Kaguya, and as the mistress of the House of Eternity, I bid you both welcome!"

Futo groaned again. This really was the worst day ever...

End
file.